

Migrant's the faceless & nameless economic driver amid Covid19.

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ABSTRACT

India is least urbanized among top ten economies of the world. Recent years have seen a spurt in development in various sectors, and a transition of work force out from agriculture to other sectors; this coupled with jobless growth has made a huge flow of unskilled labours from various states. The so called Migrants, the faceless nameless people who are the real driver's of our economy. They move from their states to other places in search of a livelihood, to sustain and survive, and contribute to our economy, in a subtle way we never actually thought off. There are many reasons for this, regional disparities, employment opportunities, are most prominent. Never the less their invisible hands are more needed than ever now, as we unlock and head towards economic activity, but maybe we have failed the migrant labours as a society. India's informal workforce is made up of 80% migrant workers, and yet we haven't given them the credibility they deserve. May be it's time now, to acknowledge who they are, and what they are, else we risk losing the major workforce of our country, and face unprecedented economic consequences.

Keywords:- Migrants, Economic, India, Workforce, States, Unskilled Labours and Livelihood.

1. Introduction

To start with let's understand a few aspects of Who is a migrant worker? And what does he do? And where does he come from? Within a country or region, when there is mass movement of unskilled or semi skilled labours, who leave their place of birth or permanent residence in search of employment, and shift to a different location in the region, or out of that region within the country (Internal Migration). Such movements of people, associated hereby are called as internal migrant workers. So we can say migration is geographic movement of people for the purpose of establishing a permanent or semi permanent residence. They are mostly employed in informal sectors and earn in cash, hardly meeting ends and send part of the money back to their native homes. These migrant workers hardly get the facilities or basic human treatment where they work, they don't have adequate sanitation and healthcare, neither access to government public distribution system, majority can't afford to send their children to schools, and needless to say they are often oppressed by their employers and locals where they work. Often they stay in rented accommodation in slums, in unhygienic conditions or live at pavements or makeshift tents where they work. While they are not only the economic driver of destinations places but also play a vital role in development and growth of industries, businesses, people and many others. They mainly come from the poorest strata of our society and SC and ST families. Their working condition is no better than bonded labourer's, with limits on personal freedom, long working hours, debt bondage and underpayment. Their main motive to migrate, is preventing further downward slide into poverty, moreover they can sustain themselves working and sending a part of their incomes back home, to support their families. It's seen that most of the migrant's shifts for employment, socioeconomic factors household income are vital reasons for this relocating. A pattern noticed, is that there are two types of migrant workers, Circular migrants are those who keep a foothold in their villages, and return during agricultural season, and do not come from absolute poor families, and another group is which is more inclined to shift permanently to urban locations, due to a boom in urban construction, manufacturing, mining and service industry.

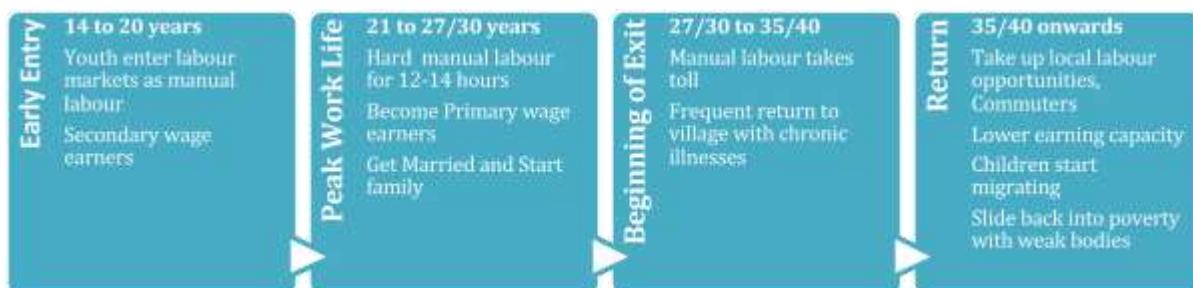
2. Economic Activity and Reasons for Shifting

Migration is the barometer of changing socio economic and political condition at the national and international levels. It is also a sign of wide disparities in

economic and social conditions between the origin and destination. They are generally forced to migrate because of lack of employment opportunity in their places or because of better prospects in a different place. Migration is also linked to regional disparities, underdevelopment, poverty, spatial disorganization; social inequalities, rural stagnation, and unbalanced regional development over national space are the most forceful reasons for migration. According to State of World Population Report, it is estimated that India has 139 million internal migrant workers, and most of them have opted to move because of economic reasons, and they make up 80% of workforce in our informal sector. The country's infrastructure is built on the backs of these workers. They construct malls, multiplexes, hospitals, apartment blocks, hotels. They work as factory hands, delivery boys, loaders, cooks, painters, rickshaw pullers. They stand the whole day by the side of the road selling fruits and vegetables and tea and flowers and perhaps the list can go on. Migrant workers are also employed by MSME's (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises.) and other industries like automobiles, textiles and FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods). Generally they are unskilled or semi skilled and the bare reason is employment for them, to migrate. Growing urbanization requires a workforce more than ever before, manufacturing, mining, construction is booming industry, with these the load of work has increased exponentially so the demand for workers. Migrants come to play the most vital part, not only engaging in work and supporting themselves and their families, but running the wheels of our economy. These migrant workers are generally from the poorest strata of society, they need to escape poverty meet ends and these kinds of workers are more or less permanent in the urban location where they work. They are generally uneducated unskilled and mainly involved in laborious jobs. There's another class of migrants who are slightly well off, and educated and skilled. They mainly work in small industrial units of garments, shoes, embroidery, security services, and hospitality sectors. Although these are informal sectors but this kind of migration often leads to substantial remittances and wealth and asset accumulation and an exit from poverty. Agriculture based employment has substantially decreased in India, so has the unemployment rates shot up, amalgamated with stagnation of scope of employment in villages people are forced to migrate in search of jobs. Never the less there are other contributing factors to migrate, if someone from a family has migrated before, and has established a permanent source of income, then chances are the future generation is likely to migrate. Displacement from home due to natural calamity, forced eviction from land and rights and humanitarian crisis are also reasons for migration. It's seen mostly migration takes place from a rural to an urban area, and majority of the migration takes place in this sector, although rural to rural and urban to rural and urban to urban migration does happen but it's less compared to rural to urban migration numbers.

3. Pertinent Challenges

A migrant worker becomes an unwanted asset at his destination place of work, if he is unable to work for his employer. Moreover he can't afford to stay without working for long, for whatever reasons, as he can't risk losing his job and neither can he fend for himself either. It becomes a clear situation of hand to mouth existence for them, they work daily, get paid, and so can eat, and that's the reality. They are really not considered citizens at their destination work place, and often are subject to harassment cruelty of different sorts from their employer, locals and even police. They don't have voting rights there, neither access to medical treatment, education for children or public distribution system. They face discrimination in salary and often are paid less. As for their working conditions go, it's hardly humane, they are exposed to hazardous chemicals in dyeing and chemical industries, long working hours and unhygienic conditions. Other than these they risk losing their life in sectors such as high rise constructions, steel factories stone crushing, even if they don't lose life, and end up losing a limb or get paralyzed, it ends up to be an even more disaster, because hardly they have any social security cover, and after an accident they can never make ends meet. These are pertinent challenges faced by migrants all over. Noteworthy to mention that majority of migrants live in poor unhygienic condition, without basic sanitation and clean water and are susceptible to range of diseases, poor health and migrants have been identified as high risk group by National Aids Control Organization. They hardly get the opportunity to acquire new skills, or move up in their jobs. It is seen that they often suffer from chronic diseases, which they never heed due to lack of knowledge and facilities and more so they exit from their jobs with poor health conditions. The schematic approach below shows the average age of a migrant worker, his pay and his retirement in a flow chart manner.



(Source: - <https://www.weforum.org/events/india-economic-summit-2017>)

4. Calamitous Brunt of Covid19 on Migrants and Economy

This pandemic has unleashed a host of cataclysmic realities that were never ever considered and more importantly not only the migrants have been affected, there are deeper repercussions and factors to consider now on moving ahead. The lockdown has not only simply taken off the migrants jobs at their workplaces, due to shutting down of shops, factories and other businesses they have been rendered homeless and penny less too. With no means to support families and no work virtually they have been left to fend for themselves, with hardly any help from government and local authorities, the migrants decided to head back to their natives. With all modes of transportation closed, their desperation reached peak, and its well documented they walked back home, some cycled some hitch hiked rides and some even made up make shift rickshaws¹ to carry their families and belongings, on our highways just to get back where they felt they belonged, their homes. With no job and savings they hardly could pay their rent at their place of work, some were evicted some left on their own, with no cash to survive they literally were at mercy of NGO's for food just to survive. Thankfully many NGO's and the government although later came forward to provide them with food ration and basic necessities throughout the country. Amid a lack of responsive mobility option, despair, treatment alike commodity and inferior citizens and serious concerns of being infected and the craving to be at the comforts of their homes, several million migrant workers and families, begun to tread on foot. With no government support of travel, their journey has often been several hundred miles following highways and railway tracks, often hungry and relentlessly tired. This has turned into the great human tragedy. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet Jeria, also raised her concern and said in a statement that she was distressed by the plight of the informal migrant workers affected by the lockdown, many of whom were, in effect, forced to leave the cities where they worked. However, she hailed the efforts to address the crisis by providing proper shelter, food to these migrants, who were returning to their native places and were actually victims of pandemic. This kind of chaos finds an uncanny similarity during the time of India-Pakistan partition in 1947, when millions of people from both sides were garrote at borders, leading to exceptionally brutal and terrible miseries. The reverse movement of thousands of migrants is an ongoing challenge. In order to give relief to all of them and prevent infection from spreading, around 40,000 relief camps and shelters have been set up all over the country in which over 14 lakh stranded migrant workers and other needy people are provided relief (Data of April 2020)¹. Out of this, more than 80% of the relief camps have been set up by states, while the rest are by NGOs. Also, over 26,000 food camps have been set up in which more than 1 crore people have been provided food. Over 16.5 lakh workers are being provided with food and relief by their employers and industries. The hotspot of these relief shelters and camps are in the cities of Kerala, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Delhi, etc. A large number of migrants have already reached their villages, and millions of others who are currently in the shelter homes and many who decided to stay back in cities are desperately waiting for the end of lockdown period to move their native places. This time many labourer's will not come back due to shock and uncertainty, which means that most of small and medium sized companies, factories and other businesses may face the heat once the lockdown period is over. There would be a shortage of labour or contract skilled workers and households also find tough to run their daily work without the helpers, drivers, maids etc. The production and profits of small and medium size factories and businesses will suffer due to shortage of labourer's and other contract skilled workers. Because the scale of their production business would reduce and their wage bill, will also rise, due to higher payment to retain the limited available labour force. Shortage of workers poses challenge to restart the economy. Migrant workers and families are now desperately leaving there work places to their natives, they are hurt by the fact that the destination places particularly the cities are treating them badly and most of them have lost the trust on the government, and with no support from their employers, they hope to make ends meet in their native places. Despite repeated assurances from the central and state governments, millions of migrants are desperate to return from cities with double threats of life and livelihood by covid19. However, the early sign of unexpected surge in unemployment rate (Bihar: 47%; Jharkhand: 47%; UP: 22%)², at the native places of migrants indicate an ominous picture.

5. Despondency and Desperation to return home. (EXODUS)

Amid the lockdown the government allowed movement of migrants and introduced Shramik Special Trains, the mammoth scale of migrants registering to return home could be seen clearly. The estimates are only indicative, the visible reports of current registration by migrants to return home clearly reflects their desperation, about two million have registered in UP (one million returned as well), over 600000 in Jharkhand, and about 1 million in Bihar for coming home. On the other hand, 2 million migrants registered to go home from Gujarat, 644 thousand from Punjab, 225 thousand from Telangana and over 146 thousand from Haryana³. The registered data reveal that over three-fourth of the registered migrants are either from Bihar or Uttar Pradesh. The registration process is still on and more will register for return to home.

¹ <https://clc.gov.in/clc/> Chief Labour Commissioner Govt. Of India.

² Data available from Individual State Governments.

³ Data available from Individual State Governments.

Their desperation to go home can be seen that even after announcement of various measures and assurance of essentials and retaining their livelihood by opening the economic activities, they are not ready to stay anymore. Many of them do not have proof of domicile in the places they work, cannot get a ration card and thus remain out of the ambit of the public distribution system. More than a month after the nationwide lockdown dried up the sources of livelihood for migrant workers in different parts of the country; the Union Home Ministry has passed an order allowing the interstate movement of these workers. Even as shelter homes and relief camps were set up to support the millions of migrants who were stranded across the country, many of them now did manage to return to their villages and others are waiting to go. By all accounts, most of them have spent the past two months in overcrowded shelters arranged by governments, civil society groups or employers.

While they are not only the economic driver of destination places but also play a vital role in development and growth of industries, businesses, people and many others. Of course, the state governments are taking care of these migrants at present but the companies, businessmen, contractors and other highly paid service workers hardly come forward to help those migrants during their hard time. Most are upset over the treatment they received from their employers and knowing that cities still have not accepted the migrants. Even after so many years of contribution in the progress of destination places, its governments have not provided them any assistance and break their trust. Desperation has lead to a reverse movement and migrants, majority on foot with bare precious belongings on head, some on cycles with little ones tied at the back, sacks containing their prized little possession, some hugging their babies while getting on to overcrowded trucks just returning to a place called home. These sights sorrowful and pathetic enough has epitomes of its own, where in migrants died of exhaustion, dead in sleep on railway tracks and many of sheer exhaustion, after walking empty stomachs and some in road accidents. Lack of clear directives from government has lead to chaotic situation in Shramik special trains, with complex registration process uncertain rules and changing directives and with no food or water provided, but firmly the migrants hung on just to get back home. They have learnt some important lessons during this pandemic, and it will change the way migrants are treated, and the outlook of the society, government and businesses towards them.

6. The Invisible Hands of Economy

Migrant workers are considered to be the backbone of economic activities in urban centers across India, be it the unskilled casual labour in construction work or semi skilled contract workers in factory, or domestic helps. They are driver of urban lives and economy as many of them work in factories, build roads and houses, drive autos or taxis and work in informal sector. The industry people and employers are realizing for the first time, the fact that activities in their industries will not see a recovery without the migrant labourer's. Most relatively developed or industrialized states such as Maharashtra, Gujarat, Punjab, Haryana, and Karnataka would face a labour crisis to kick start economic and other industrial activities as many migrants are returning home and many more are planning to do so. This mass reverse migration has raised concerns over the looming economic crisis. There are questions on what will happen to small and medium size industries and other economic activities that are fully dependent upon the labourers.

It is true that these migrants are not only an economic agent at destination places but also at their origin places, who sent a huge amount of money as remittances to their families. The home states migrant workers also fear that huge return migrants, in the absence of adequate employment opportunities, will surge the joblessness in rural areas and spread the pandemic in hitherto Covid19 free regions. Therefore, the economy of migrant's home states will also be affected badly on four counts:

- (I) Increasing pressure to generate livelihood opportunities to return migrants.
- (II) Reduction in remittances or cash flow from the out migrants.
- (III) In the absence of adequate employment opportunities, the joblessness in rural areas will surge further.
- (IV) Fear of spread the pandemic in hitherto Covid19 free regions.

The businesses and other industrial bodies have already started putting pressure on the governments to stem the reverse migration as shortage of manpower will impede their ability to restart work. A key reason for this is the concern raised by MSMEs who think that they may not be able to resume their operation fully because of huge dependence on migrant worker. This is evident now that for the first time, the plight of migrant workers has gained a serious attention, who are invisible and are not considered as an important economic agent or drivers, both at the destination and origin places.

7. The Way Forward

Migrant workers are often considered nowhere citizen and denied their entitlements and who are the poorest and disadvantaged sections of the society. This

vulnerable lot is invisible and mostly neglected in policy discourse. The enormous miseries faced in the current pandemic witnessed their widespread misery and untold sufferings. We as a society have failed them and can't ignore them anymore now on, neither can we afford to, and its needs a collective effort from the government, civil society and institutions to make it happen.

The most important questions would be finding a job or means of livelihood for return migrants. States such as Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Jharkhand are worst hit by the reverse migration. If they decide to stay back at the origin for a longer period it will pose a huge challenge to the home and destination State governments and economy.

Some of the following short term and long term policy for the betterment of migrants, which should not be treated as 'outsiders' but as an 'economic agents':

- The central and state governments should work in synchronization to protect the interests of both migrant workers and the employers. After the lifting of lockdown, the challenge is to bringing back the return migrants to restart economic activities in urban areas. They should be provided dignified jobs with assurance of social security and other facilities such as housing and safe environment with provision of assistance in sending their native places at the times of crisis.
- A large number of interstate migrants used to migrate in the cities by leaving their families at the place of origin and send back money home. In such cases, the documentation or identification proofs of a migrant could be different from the destination state or where they work. However, these documents such as ration card and Aadhar are crucial for receiving the social security benefits. In this connection, there is an urgent need to form universal documents, applicable to all states to ensure portability of benefits across the country such as Public Distribution Systems, MGNREGA (Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act), health insurance and other benefits. The honorable supreme court has already urged the government for 'One nation, One Ration Card' scheme during lockdown. Such a permanent solution is need of the hour.
- There is an urgent need to maintain a dynamic registry for the migrants to prepare a database, supplemented with their skill-sets and job requirement details for greater usage. So that appropriate policy measures can be taken for the welfare of migrants in the time of pandemic like the current one. The state can employ the unskilled returning migrants to some extent under the government's MGNREGA scheme, and generate suitable employment for skilled workers to retail the return migrants in the long run.
- According to the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act (ISMW) act 1979, an interstate migrant worker is any person who is not recruited by or through licensed contractors. However, most of the migrant workers are not routed through licensed contractors, so a huge number of migrants are excluded from getting the benefit of ISMW act. This act is only applicable to establishment which has five or more inter-state migrant workers or employees. The current crisis has exposed the inadequacy of this act. There is a need to modify the existing ISMW act for the welfare of interstate migrant.
- Similarly, under the Building and Other Construction Workers' (Regulation of Employment and Conditions of Service) Act, 1996, the State governments have funds collected in the Building and Other Construction Workers Welfare Board. However, the list of the workers and the usage of the fund under the board have serious impediments which needs to be improved upon to make it impactful.
- While the Census is held decennially, the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) used to fill the gap with surveys on employment and migration every five years. The Census does provide the aggregated numbers with limited qualitative dimensions. The last NSSO survey on internal migration and outmigration was held in 2007–08. Hence, it is an opportune time for a comprehensive plan to address the data lags.
- Certainly, the Deendayal Antyodaya Yojana National Urban Livelihoods Mission (DAY-NULM) Scheme of Shelters for Urban Homeless (SUH) has not been able to demonstrate its commitment of 'Antyodaya' for the urban and shelter poor. In fact, DAYNULM which could have come to the rescue of these workers, itself suffers from several inherent challenges. For instance, for the last 18 months the Government has been mulling over the idea of outsourcing the upkeep of the mission to corporate and philanthropic institutions. This is an utter failure on part of the government. Expanding the SUH component of DDUNULM to meet the decent space and shelter requirements along with catering to the shelter needs of women, children, elderly, persons with disabilities; community kitchens; medical help; in kind assistance through public distribution systems, water, toilets, etc.
- Thalinomics: The Economics of a Plate of Food in India, that attempts to quantify what a common person pays for a Thali (platter) across India, deserves special mention. It estimates that the all India price of a decent vegetarian and non-vegetarian meal (constructed using the dietary guidelines by National Institute of Nutrition, Hyderabad, for Indians) as little under Rs. 25 and Rs. 40, respectively. Therefore, in the current health emergency, the Pradhan Mantri Gareeb Kalyan Yojana (PMGKY) package should be expanded to ensure a balanced diet and dignified food assistance is provided to the poor. Understandably, the minimum

assistance to achieve these norms for balanced diet and sundry expenses, direct cash transfer of around INR 2000 per person per month (that is a dollar a day) should also be implemented as an option in addition to the PDS system, especially given the failure of food distribution system and delivery capacity as observed in past months during the crisis.

- Given the importance of prevention of spread of Coronavirus, contact tracing, surveillance, e-passes, and other such usage of Aarogya Setu app, harnessing the technology, an android phone supporting the app should be made available to each citizen, especially to the migrants who are at more risk.

The Prime Minister announced a special economic and comprehensive package of Rs 20 lakh crore on 12 May 2020. As part of the economic measures “Atma Nirbhar Bharat Abhiyaan” (Self Reliant India Campaign), the Finance Minister announced many short and long term measures for supporting the poor including migrant worker. Along with the above and some of the latest other announcements pertaining to migrant workers are:

- Free food grains supply to migrants for 2 months (Extended till November 2020) this includes distribution of free food grains and pulses to 8 crores migrant labourers. Additional food grain to all the States/UTs at the rate of 5 kg per migrant labourer and 1 kg Chana per family per month for two months i.e. May and June 2020, (extended till November 2020) free of cost shall be allocated. Migrant labourers not covered under National Food Security Act or without a ration card in the State/UT in which they are stranded at present will be eligible. The entire outlay of Rs. 3500 crores will be borne by Government of India.
- To provide a stimulus to employment, Government will now allocate an additional Rs 40,000 crore under MGNREGS: The Centre has decided to allocate an additional Rs 40,000 crore for the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGS). In the Union Budget 2020-21, the government had allocated Rs 61,500 crore for MGNREGS, and the Rs 40,000 crore allocation will be over and above the budget estimate. This move will help generate nearly 300 crore person days in total.
- Technology system to be used enabling Migrants to access PDS (Ration) from any Fair Price Shops in India. One Nation one Ration Card will benefit 67 crore beneficiaries covering 83% of PDS population will be covered by National portability of Ration cards by August, 2020. 100% National portability will be achieved by March, 2021. This scheme will enable a migrant worker and their family members to access PDS benefits from any Fair Price Shop in the country. This will ensure that the people in transit, especially migrant workers can also get the benefit of PDS benefit across the country.
- Scheme for Affordable Rental Housing Complexes (ARHC) for Migrant Workers and Urban Poor to be launched: Central Government will launch a scheme for migrant workers and urban poor to provide ease of living at affordable rent. Affordable Rental Housing Complexes will provide social security and quality life to migrant labour, urban poor, and students etc. This will be done through converting government funded houses in the cities into ARHC under PPP mode through concessionaire; manufacturing units, industries, institutions, associations to develop ARHC on their private land and operate; and Incentivizing State Government agencies/Central Government Organizations on similar lines to develop ARHC and operate. The exact details of the scheme will be released by the Ministry/Department.
- PM CARES Fund Trusts allocates Rs. 1000 Crores for Relief Measures for Migrants. For strengthening the existing measures being taken for the welfare of the migrants and poor, the States/UTs will be given a lumpsum assistance of total Rs. 1000 Crore from PM CARES Fund. This amount would be provided to the State Governments/UTs to place it at the disposal of the District Collectors/Municipal Commissioners for strengthening their efforts in providing accommodation facilities, making food arrangements, providing medical treatment and making transportation arrangements of the migrants. The fund will be released to the District Collector/District Magistrate/Municipal Commissioner through the State Disaster Relief Commissioner of the States/UTs concerned.

8. End Notes

The perennial problems of the migrant worker, in retrospect, the national lockdown period may offer many lessons to employers, businessmen and governments. For migrants, distance matter and the lockdown have given a new lesson that could lead to a significant reduction in long distance migration, especially without appropriate incentives and adhering to safety norms. Number of migrants who fled the big cities may now prefer to work in their marginal farm or find work in nearby towns. It could deprive many manufacturing units and business centers in Delhi, Mumbai, Surat and Gurugram etc. for a long period of time and the businesses and economy are likely to face a recession, if not depression. In this process, the sources states will also have the burden of rising labour force with more unemployed or underemployed people. They need to create more job opportunity in rural areas particularly in nonfarm activities with a gainful employment to those migrants who do

not want to go back to the cities and rely on their day to day labour for earning their livelihood and make a decent living. Undeniably, this is an unprecedented situation at the times of pandemic and the ways and means to tackle the same has to be sensitive, responsive, quick and above all caring. In the post Covid19 situation, bringing back the confidence and trust of the migrant workers, over the course of time, by the governments and market stakeholders, will be one of the most important foundations stepping stone towards the envisaged vision of New India.

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